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Mainers discuss sustainability at conference

By [Scott Monroesmonroe@mainetoday.com](mailto:Scott.Monroesmonroe@mainetoday.com)
Staff Writer

WATERVILLE — Ross Nason got up to tell the crowd about recycling efforts, but he was still in awe over the first speaker.



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Laura Patterson, with the Local Foods and Gardening Group, discusses community gardening ideas during the annual meeting Saturday of the Sustain Mid-Maine Coalition, held at The Center in Waterville.

Staff photo by Michael G. Seamans

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Earlier, John Joseph had talked about an energy assistance program to homeowners in Waterville and Winslow. Part of that effort has involved weatherizing homes to better retain heat, and the residents getting rebates in return for that work.

"Did you hear that? \$92,000 in rebates," Nason said, recalling what Joseph had said. "That blows my mind that those types of projects have already been accomplished."

The comments came Saturday morning during the annual meeting of the Sustain Mid Maine Coalition. About 35 people attended the meeting, which was held in the City Council chambers at The Center in downtown Waterville.

The group began in late 2009 after area residents, state legislators and municipal officials gathered for three-day community workshop to discuss the idea that natural resources are

limited and must be treated with greater care if they are to be sustained.

Funded by grants and private donations, the Sustain Mid Maine Coalition hired a part-time staff coordinator, Linda Woods, and has relied on volunteers to meet and work on programs aimed at helping the area. It has a \$16,500 budget.

Waterville City Administrator Mike Roy, who is also president of the group's board, encouraged members to recruit others to join the group, which has filed paperwork to become a nonprofit organization.

"We need new blood," Roy said, adding "we need to have a much broader fundraising effort."

The coalition has divided its members into five teams to focus on specific topics: education; transportation; rethinking, reducing, reusing and recycling; energy; and growing and supporting local foods. Group leaders on Saturday offered summaries of what their teams had accomplished last year.

Joseph, a Thomas college professor and leader of the energy team, noted how the group received a \$175,000 stimulus grant last year from Efficiency Maine Trust to offer low-cost energy audits and home winterization benefits to residents in those communities. Working with the Kennebec Valley Community Action Program, or KVCAP, they hired John Reuthe as the project director.

Reuthe said that 23 weatherization projects had been completed in Waterville and Winslow, while there were 28 energy audits and 56 consultations. The average cost of the weatherization projects was about \$8,000, he said, while those residents received a total of \$92,000 in energy rebates.

He said the program will focus more on multi-family and commercial buildings as well this year. Reuthe said that one landlord who had a building weatherized told him "it was like getting a \$50 per month rent increase and the tenants were more comfortable."

Joseph said later that the program plans another 50 or so weatherizations in 2011, at a rate of five to six per month.

On transportation, team leader Jim Wood touted the new Kennebec Explorer bus service, which starts Feb. 7, and will depart from The Concourse in Waterville throughout the morning and afternoon Monday through Friday to points in Waterville and Augusta. Wood, who is also KVCAP's transportation director, said the team had printed 20,000 bus schedules on newsprint, which are being distributed for free.

The program involved purchasing six buses at a cost of \$140,000 apiece. The [Maine Department of Transportation](#) paid for most of the expense, Wood said, though KVCAP will operator and manage them.

"It's the first of what we hope will be a much larger expansion of transportation services," Wood said.

Nason, of the recycling team, said the group had made 2,000 tote bags to be distributed for free, to encourage people to reduce the use of disposal bags. Kate Newkirk, of the education

team, talked about offering compact fluorescent lightbulbs to downtown businesses and setting up information booths on "green" practices in various places.

Stu Silverstein, leader of the local foods team, noted the creation of community gardens in raised beds on North and Moor streets in Waterville, plus a new one coming this summer on Dallaire Street in Winslow. Area residents purchase raised beds and maintain their own gardens.

Silverstein recounted how he was unsure at first whether a community garden would be successful in the city's South End, on Moor Street, but the response "was extraordinary."

"It really told me there is a need for community gardens in urban areas," Silverstein said.

The group also has received a \$500 grant from Inland Hospital to build a greenhouse, at a location to be determined.

A strategic vision statement adopted by the group in January 2009 imagines the region in the year 2020, setting goals of cutting the area's use of fossil fuels in half, eating mostly locally grown foods, eliminating most landfills, and more.

"We are a strong regional community with shared interests," the vision statement says. "We collaborate in making wise energy and environmental choices. We make public and private decisions in terms of their environmental, social and economic impacts, including quality of life and employment opportunities."

Woods, the group's coordinator, read the entire statement aloud Saturday before members divided into their teams to brainstorm goals they hope to accomplish in 2011.

As Woods finish reading that statement — "we use our natural resources such as wind, water, wood and sun, to provide for needs of everyone in our communities and beyond, while at the same time preserving the integrity of resources for the future" — a holler came from a corner of the room.

"Amen!" Joseph hollered.

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